

Date: March 9, 2015  
Bill #1051

## AN ACT STRENGTHENING CONNECTICUT'S ELECTIONS

Senator Cassano, Representative Jutila and Members of the GAE

My name is Stuart Wells and I am the Democratic Registrar of Voters from Norwalk. I am here to oppose most of Bill #1051. (I do not oppose Sections 15 to 23 of the bill which cover matters other than changing the current two registrar system.)

In 1932, Connecticut's Secretary of the State served a two-year term and had an annual salary of \$2,500. His name was John A. Danaher. Wilbur Cross was Governor. Norwalk had 16,417 registered voters, 14,416 of them voted in the 1932 election, an 87.8% turnout. Hoover carried Norwalk, and the state, beating FDR. Under a 1931 state law, Norwalk, like all 50 towns with over 10,000 population used voting machines.

Norwalk had six registrars, and the 1932 "Connecticut State Register and Manual", the "Blue Book" was still bound in maroon, as it had been for many years. (1935 was the first year that the "blue book" was bound in blue.) Connecticut had County government, as well as Town government, but then, as now, elections were run by the towns.

Like most towns, Norwalk's 1933 election was held on the first Monday in October. That year, the current two-registrar system was born state wide. In Norwalk, John E. McGrath was elected the Democratic Registrar and John A. Mills was elected the Republican Registrar.

That was over 80 years ago, and a lot has changed since then. Norwalk electorate has almost tripled in size, and we now have 44,000 voters. The country has seen a depression, and several recessions, a world war and several "smaller" wars like Korea, Viet Nam and Iraq. The cold war has come, and gone. One president has died in office, another was murdered, a third resigned under threat of impeachment, and a fourth was impeached, but acquitted. But the towns still each have two registrars, one from each major party, although they are elected in the state election years now, not the municipal years.

Since 1933, those two town registrars have, collectively, held over 20,000 local, state and national elections. They have gotten the job done, while acting as the guardians of democracy to assure the voters that neither political party was in position to control those elections, and to subvert the outcome. That essential safeguard is still needed today. So is the safeguard of electing both registrars, which gives them the power to appeal to the voters, and thus a greater ability to resist political pressure from their own parties.

People are not perfect. In the last 15 years or so, two of Connecticut's Constitutional officers have gone to jail for corruption and so have several mayors, and nationally, one Secretary of State (for voter fraud). But, the office of mayor was not changed to make it an appointed position, the Constitutional offices of Connecticut were not changed, and there was no national movement to abolish the office of Secretary of State.

As far as I know, none of Connecticut's 338 registrars have gone to jail for corruption. Of course, this may be because the job doesn't attract people with larceny on their minds – there's nothing to steal. Elections are complicated things to run, and sometimes mistakes are made, but under the "two elected registrars" system, those mistakes are almost always honest ones. Human error; not an attempt to subvert democracy.

Most registrars get along quite well with each other, despite their opposing political views, but, in some towns, not so much. Work-place conflict is also a human nature problem and will not be solved by having one registrar. The potential for conflict would just be shifted to between the town clerk and the registrar. I should note that in Norwalk, the two registrars and the town clerk have an excellent working relationship.

Bridgeport's registrars have been criticized for not ordering enough ballots in 2010. Why would having only one registrar to do all the work prevent this type of problem? Mistakes are more likely when someone has too much to do, and no time to double check his or her decisions. Bridgeport's official looked into the situation and recommended several changes, which did not include having only one registrar.

Hartford's registrars have been criticized in 2014 for not having checklists prepared and available when the polls were supposed to open, and not producing accurate election results. These are both serious matters. But having only one registrar in charge of all the work would not have prevented these problems either.

Indeed, it seems to have happened because one registrar was given more authority than the others, and then made mistakes because she had too much to do. Along the way, the town clerk's office never seems to have stepped in and "gone the extra mile" to help prevent the problem. And the town clerk didn't do any better at adding up the results. Hartford's officials are looking into this situation themselves and seem quite capable of deciding what needs to be done.

Having just one registrar, with responsibility for all the work, will increase, not decrease the potential for honest election mistakes. It will eliminate an essential safeguard against dishonest elections -- a safeguard which has served Connecticut well for over 80 years. It will make the one registrar more susceptible to improper political pressure, and will reduce, not improve, voter confidence in honest elections with accurate results.

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